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Nathalie Cely, Ambassador of Ecuador to the United States

Richmond, Calif., has just marked the one-year anniversary of a massive fire at the Chevron oil refinery that hospitalized 15,000 Bay Area residents. The fire, caused by a leak from a dangerously corroded pipe, sparked a wave of lawsuits, legislative and regulatory reforms, and criminal investigations aimed at cracking down on the shoddy environmental practices of local oil refineries. Still, these steps have not allayed the fears of the community. Last weekend, thousands of residents, unsatisfied with the changes, turned to Chevron's gates in protest. My country, Ecuador, expressed our solidarity with the victims of Richmond through a full-page ad in Saturday's edition of The San Francisco Chronicle. Why? Simply put, we are joined in environmental trauma at the hands of irresponsible oil companies.

Although we are a small country, Ecuador plays a unique role in global environmental, energy, and climate changes discussions. Located on the equator, between the Andes Mountains Pacific Ocean, and Amazon rainforest, we are one of the most biodiverse countries in the world. It was in Ecuador, home to the Galápagos Islands, that Charles Darwin studied this diversity of life and developed his Theory of Evolution. Yet underneath this natural beauty lies both a treasure and a curse: oil.

Oil was first discovered in Ecuador by Texaco (now owned by Chevron) in 1967, and quickly became a boon to our national economy as foreign oil companies began flooding in and implementing large-scale extraction projects. Yet what the people and government of Ecuador did not know at the time, and only discovered decades later, was that these foreign companies were in many cases using inferior technology while adhering to lower environmental standards than they had in other, more developed countries.

Our environment and people were devastated by these double standards. Billions of gallons of toxic sludge -- far in excess of the amount of oil spilled at the BP Gulf disaster -- polluted our lands, communities, and rainforests. The people of Ecuador, primarily poor indigenous communities, suffered for years, and in many cases have still yet to recover.

Thankfully, like the victims in Richmond, the people of Ecuador learned from these painful experiences, and we instituted several important changes. Today, while oil remains a major export of our country, we now hold all companies to the highest safety, environmental, and technological standards. No longer can companies -- domestic or foreign -- damage our environment and evade responsibility.

We enshrined environmental rights in our national constitution, which also commits the country to "the promotion of efficient energy, the development and use of environmentally clean practices and technologies such as renewable, diversified energies with low environmental impact."

By implementing a national plan to shift the country's energy matrix to clean renewable energies, we seek to promote a healthy, sustainable future that protects our people and our land.

Part of this national plan is the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, a bold commitment by Ecuador to leave 20 percent of its oil underground -- and to prevent the emission of an estimated 1.2 billion tons of carbon dioxide. These 846 million barrels lay underneath Yasuní National Park, located in the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest, one of the most biologically diverse locations on the planet.

But perhaps the most important lesson we learned is that everyday citizens have the power to institute change and hold parties accountable for their actions. Empowered by our country's strict commitment to the rule of law and social justice, private civil cases have been initiated by victims of environmental damage. This includes two-decade-old litigation against Texaco's new owners, Chevron, for alleged environmental damage in Lago Agrio decades ago. The case was originally brought by the victims to U.S. courts; however, after years of fighting jurisdiction Chevron successfully moved the trial to Ecuador. In recent months, Ecuadorian courts finally ruled, siding in favor of the plaintiffs and issuing a judgment against Chevron.

While Chevron is now appealing the decision, and in the process spending hundreds of millions of dollars in lobbying and PR campaigns to smear Ecuador and evade legal responsibility, our government's position remains unchanged: we are impartial in the case, and will respect the legal process and enforce the final decision, whatever it may be. Our commitment to our citizens, our environment, and the law remains steadfast.

Richmond, the Gulf of Mexico, and Lago Agrio are inextricably bound by the winds and water we all share. Every victory is a victory for the world. This is the message we hoped to share through our recent advertisements, not just with the citizens of Richmond, but to the people and politicians of the U.S., and victims anywhere of environmental damage.

As new technologies to extract resources are developed and deployed around the world, and the global drive to secure resources becomes more intense, we must not forget our responsibility to protect the safety of our citizens and environment. We cannot sacrifice our long-term health for short-term profit. Uniform standards for safety and technology must be implemented around the world. And the time has come for a global conversation between peoples and governments to develop responsible guidelines to keep our precious world thriving. That is why the people of Ecuador applaud and support the victims in Richmond and all others around the world who are willing to take a stand in the name of justice.

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